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Trial in Rome: Agca's 'Double Game'

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ROME, June 21 — The trial of eight men accused of conspiring to assassinate Pope John Paul II heard more conflicting testimony the other day from Mehmet Ali Acga. The subject was the question of how many other gunmen were in St. Peter's Square on the day Mr. Acga shot and wounded the Pope.

News Analysis

Silence hung over the courtroom as the chief judge, Severino Santiapichi, recited earlier testimony of a Turkish extremist named Yalcin Ozbey. Mr. Ozbey had told investigators that Serat Sirri Kadem, also known as Akif, was with Mr. Agca when he shot the Pope on May 13, 1981.

Mr. Agca — the prosecution's main witness for the charge that the Bulgarian secret service, at the behest of the Soviet Union, conspired to kill the Polish-born Pope — sat sullenly as the testimony was read. Listeners had the impression that well-guarded secrets were being strewn like pearls before the court.

Success Yields to Confusion

The intense cross-questioning that followed seemed crowned with success when Mr. Agca admitted for the first time, "Yes, there was a third person." Then, pointing to an obscure figure on a blown-up photograph of the shooting, he said that was Akif.

Moments later, however, the success crumbled. The judge, evidently misconstruing Mr. Ozbey's words, referred to Mr. Kadem and Akif as two different people. Mr. Agca, alert to the confusion, reversed himself, insisting that the Turk in Rome was not Mr. Kadem, but a man he knew only as Akif. Mr. Kadem, he said, had been jailed in Turkey in 1979. The man in the photograph was probably Omer Ay, another Turk.

Stalling, raising his bid, backing off when the stakes are too high, Mr. Agca seems to gamble with the truth like a bargaining chip in the trial that enters its fifth week on Monday.

By his own admission, Mr. Agca has been playing a "double game." He has testified against Bulgaria and the Soviet Union while bargaining for his freedom from Italy or the United States. By his reasoning, those nations should be willing to free him as a reward for his damaging information against their Soviet bloc adversaries.

His admission of this double game, in testimony this week, seems to play into the hands of defense attorneys for the three Bulgarian defendants, who have repeatedly insisted, with the full backing of Bulgaria, that Mr. Agca was coached to testify against them by Western secret services, offering the prospect of a pardon.

But despite his far-reaching admissions, Mr. Agca has not budged from his basic contention that Bulgaria, and thus the Soviet Union, designed and financed the plot to murder the Pope.

In the trial's first four weeks, Mr. Agca has been involved in a crucial test of wits against Judge Santiapichi, the white-haired Sicilian who is a veteran of Italy's toughest terrorist trials.

By Italian procedure, the brunt of cross-questioning falls on the chief judge. Judge Santiapichi has to determine, by peeling back layers of invention and distortion, whether Mr. Agca is telling the truth in his basic charge against the Bulgarians.

The task is monumental. Mr. Agca has, by his own hand, inflicted crucial damage on his credibility, asserting that he is Jesus and predicting the imminent end of the world. He has acknowledged having distorted the truth, has accused Italy's secret service of eliciting his cooperation and has acknowledged that he sought to blackmail the United States Government to obtain his release from prison.

Many of these bizarre statements seem to emerge from Mr. Agca's penchant for deducing farfetched conclusions from simple facts.

Fueled by News Reports

He admits, for example, that his conclusion that Italy and the United States sought a "political solution" to his case by granting him a pardon is drawn essentially from Italian newspaper reports. Early in the trial, he cited a letter from Bulgarian justice authorities, informing him that he faced trial in Sofia for slandering Bulgarian citizens, and said he had deduced from the letter that the Soviet and Bulgarian secret services menaced his life.

His imagination, court officials say, has been continuously fueled by newspaper and television reports.

In his cell in Rome's Rebibbia Prison and in the Ascoli Piceno jail in southern Italy where he has also been confined, Mr. Agca had broad access to newspapers and television.

Indeed, in Ascoli Piceno, Mr. Agca may have had contact with the Camorra, the Mafia-like criminal organization in Naples. The Camorra boss, Raffaele Cutolo, a fellow prisoner in Ascoli Piceno in 1982, reportedly approached with Mr. Agca through the prison chaplain, the Rev. Mariano Santini, who was later arrested for acting as a Camorra messenger in the jail.

Plots Within Plots

Conditions in Ascoli Piceno have also helped fuel the lingering charge that Italy's secret services or the Camorra, or both, coached Mr. Agca to implicate Bulgaria. Senior secret-service officials are now on trial in Rome on charges of conspiring, through a clandestine Masonic lodge called Propaganda 2, to further their illegal business activities and block the spread of Communist influence in Italy.

Last week, a former racketeer and state's witness against the Camorra, Giovanni Pandico, said the secret service used the Camorra to seek to influence Mr. Agca's testimony. The idea was evidently to blacken the reputation of Soviet bloc governments and thus, indirectly, weaken the electoral chances of the Communists in Italy.

Mr. Agca increased speculation about such ties this week when he said Francesco Pazienza, an accused secret service agent who is now being held in New York, had visited him in jail, offering "freedom and a French passport" in exchange for testimony against Bulgaria.

Lawyers for Mr. Pazienza and other defendants responded to such charges with ridicule. Edward Morrison, Mr. Pazienza's attorney, said his client now expected "to be accused with Pontius Pilate and Judas Iscariot of having assassinated Jesus Christ."

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